

CONCEPTS OF MARTYRDOM IN WORLD RELIGIONS

400th Anniversary (2006 CE) of Guru Arjun Dev's Martyrdom:

Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia

(Former Vice-Chancellor, Punjabi University, Patiala)

Martyrdom is a phenomenon peculiar to Semitic religions. The advent of Sikhism introduced in Indian civilization this form of self-sacrifice as a supreme ideal- a God-given opportunity- for salvation of the soul, as much as for redemption of society and state. The term *martyr* is rooted in the Greek word *martyros* that means “witness,” corresponding to its near-synonymous Arabic expression *tushahid* which gave rise to the expressions *shaheedi*, *shahadat* in Sikh parlance. In other words, a martyr, through his self-sacrificing act, stands witness to the truth that he is committed to; such a self-sublimating act is a testimony to one's upholding of his faith in the midst of unbearable tortures leading to his death. Martyrdom is different from the self-inflicted suffering of an ascetic for self-purification.

The pre-dominant Great Tradition of Indian religions- Hinduism- by virtue of its absorbent, multivalent, ‘tolerant’ tendency has been, over the millennia, accommodating even the most diehard heterodox tradition (for instance, Buddhism) within its ever-widening spectrum, thus blunting the challenges of heterodox traditions and faith-communities. Alternatively the conflicts between the orthodox and the heterodox traditions and communities have been transfigured into battles among the gods (theomachy), leaving it to them to fend for themselves. In Indian mythology the role of a martyr stood taken over by Divine intervention in favour of the forces of goodness against those of evil. That is why before the arrival of Sikhism there have been few traditions of martyrdom in Indian civilization.

Ordinarily, martyrdom is seen as culmination of the conflict between good and evil in which evil's seeming victory turns out to be self-destructive in the end, thanks to the forces and processes unleashed by the martyrdom. This is a view which is not only oversimplistic but also pregnant with *us/them*, *we/they*, polarity that causes tensional relationship between the religious communities striking opposite postures of divinizing *us* and satanizing *them*. The persecuted community envisions its martyr (*shaheed*) as fulfilling a Divine mission of upholding truth, goodness, justice and freedom; on the other hand, the persecuting community describes the punishment

of torturous death as an act of divinely vindicated retributive justice. The resultant tensional relationship between the two sides, the two religious communities, then, gets transformed into animosity between the two religions, which gradually seeps down into the collective subconscious of the two communities, with periodical sudden eruptions. *As such the predication of martyrdom in the categories of the good versus the evil needs to be transcended in the interest of interreligious harmony and intercommunity accommodation.*

On practical level, martyrdom is a phenomenon the root-course of which is the challenge to the Establishment-religious or secular- either from without or from within. The challenger may be a revealer (Prophet) of a new, unorthodox truth, or a discoverer of a new scientific idea, or a reformist-revolutionary shaking the given secular state system to its very foundation. The challenge from within may be by a 'heretic' opposing the entrenched dogmatic tradition. When Jesus delivered his divinely given Message, embodied in the Gospels (the word means 'good news'), that existing world, nearing its end, was destined to give way to the Kingdom of God on earth based on an ethic of love, peace and mercy, the Roman empire at once perceived it as a challenge to its authority and sway. The inevitable consequence- the Divine Will- was the martyrdom of Jesus Christ who was crucified during the time of Pontius Pilate who was prefect of Judaea (in which was situated Bethlehem, the birth place of Lord Jesus), then a part of the Roman province of Syria. Socrates had to drink poison on the charge of corrupting the youth by his new teachings. Galileo had to face trial by the Inquisition in Rome when he scientifically proved with his telescope that the earth was not the centre of the universe, as against the belief of both the Church and the State that the sun revolved around the earth. Abu al-Mughith al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (incorrectly called Mansur Hallaj)- a Sufi mystic- was executed in a barbarous manner by the Caliph of Baghdad in 922 CE for the reason that Sufi mysticism was considered heretical by Islamic orthodoxy of that period; the immediate provocation for his execution was his theomaniac proclamation *Ana al - haqq* (I am the Truth) which was interpreted by his executioners as a claim to divinity, though according to latest liberal Muslim scholarship, the expression means that each individual has a divine essence in him and that this essence reunites with the Divine Essence in the Sufi mystical experience of transcendence.

The history of the Sikhs since the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev in the year 1606 CE is a saga of extraordinary sufferings, sacrifices and martyrdoms. The martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev was followed by that of Guru Tegh Bahadur and of the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh. The eighteenth century saw not only two *ghallugharas* (massacres of the Sikhs) but numerous committed Sikhs, remaining steadfast in their faith being brutally tortured to death. The daily Sikh prayer reverentially remembers those devoted Sikhs who were beheaded, cut into pieces on the moving wheels, sawn by saw, and those who got their scalps removed rather than allowing their persecutors to remove even a single long hair.

The seeds of martyrdom in Sikh history were latent in the teachings of the Sikh Prophets. According to a hymn in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (page 966), Guru Nanak sought to create a Dominion of God on earth, a fortress of Truth, based on indestructible foundation of his Message *revealed* by God Himself to him; in others words the Guru laid the foundation of a new edifice of spiritual, social and political dispensation based on oneness of human spirit, equality, liberty, justice and compassion. This was a clarion call for total revolution initiated by the very first radical idea of Guru Nanak, the first Prophet of Sikh religion.

The first Message that Guru Nanak delivered to humanity, after coming out of the river *Bein*, near Kapurthala, was *no hindu, no musliman*. In other words what Guru Nanak wanted to emphasize was that the primary identity of all men and women was their being human, though secondary identities, relating to religion, culture, language, etc, are also essential as it is in and through these secondary identities that the primary identity become concrete. The concept of the primary identity of being human, first and foremost, cut at the very roots of the prevalent caste-based differential Hindu society and the discriminatory Islamic state based on the polarity of *Dar-ul-Islam/ Dar-ul-Harb*.

Guru Nanak, doctrinally, introduced another revolutionary idea that the transcendental world is real and eternal but this world is *also* real, (though not eternal), being creation of the Creator- a radical divergences from the Vedantic equation of reality with eternity. This at once invested religion with a sociological mission to redeem both society and state, apart from salvation of the soul. Thus soul, society and state were seen as holistically bonded with each other.

Sikhism thus ushered in a new socio-political praxis for a new dispensation, the divine manifesto of which was given by Guru Arjun Dev in his proclamation of *Halemi Raj* wherein there would be no predomination of one individual over another individual, of one caste over another caste, of one class over another class, of one country over another country.

By the time Mughal emperor Jahangir ascended the throne two significant developments had taken place. First, in the words of Muhsin Fani, a near-contemporary of Guru Arjun Dev the Sikh movement had carved out the blueprint of a “regular government.” The Sikh concept of God being the Divine Sovereign (*Sacha Patshah*) both in the world here and hereafter had inevitable bearings on the Mughal empire that saw a challenge to itself in the claim immanent in this concept.

The second development related to resurgence of the medieval-age Muslim fundamentalism that found its strongest proponent in the person of Mujaddad Alif Sani (Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi), headquartered at Sirhind, who exercised Caliphate-like influence over the Mughal rulers. So the faceoff between the emerging Sikh movement and the well-entrenched Mughal empire, reinforced by afore-mentioned Muslim fundamentalism was inevitable and the result was the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev who was boiled in a cauldron, made to sit on a red-hot metal plate, while burnt sand was showered over his body. The Mughal emperor, Jahangir admitted in his Memoirs (*Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*) that he was alarmed by the growing momentum of the Sikh movement and that this challenge -which he calls the growing *shop of falsehood* – was the real reason why he decided to do away with the Guru, the immediate provocation being the blessing given by the Guru to the revolting Mughal prince Khusro when the latter came to pay homage at Goindwal.

If the real reason for Jahangir’s directive to execute Guru Arjun were his belief that the Guru was running “the shop of falsehood” then why would the emperor desire to bring him (the Guru) “into the assembly of the people of Islam”- a desire expressed by Jahangir in his Memoirs. Obviously the categories of truth and falsehood in which the two contending powers are seen situated by the traditional approach to martyrdom camouflage the main reason of martyrdoms in world religions: challenge, from without or within, to the

Establishment- whether religious or secular- though the contextual forms of the challenge differ from age to age, from people to people.

This is, in its manifest form, the essence of martyrdom in Sikh religion that transcends the contrasting schemata in terms of the opposition between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between *momin* and *kafir*, between *sur* and *asur*. This kind of over-simplistic (oppositional) conception of martyrdom is erroneous also from the angle that no *ism* – whether religious or secular- can claim monopoly of truth, of goodness, of righteousness; such an absolutist claim is repugnant to the pluralist spirit of Sikhism which, unlike most of the other world religions, doctrinally, does not proclaim itself to be the full and final revelation of truth, having its exclusive franchise in perpetuity.

There is atleast, one particular feature of martyrdom that is uniquely characteristic of the Sikh tradition. Martyrs in other religion have sacrificed their lives for affirmation, for defence, of their respective religious beliefs and practices. But Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675 CE made sublime sacrifice of his life for the protection of the sacred thread (*janeu*) and the sacred forehead mark (*tilak*)- the identity symbols of Brahminical Hinduism, though the same had earlier been rejected by the first Prophet of Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, on the ground that these had become empty rituals for their wearers. When the Hindu pandits from Kashmir made supplication to Guru Tegh Bahadur that they were being forced to forsake their sacred threads and forehead marks, the Guru, at once, realized that what was at stake was the very fundamental right to religious freedom, the fundamental right to profess and practise one's faith without any deterrent coercion in any form, from any quarters. Guru Tegh Bahadur thus became the first martyr in the history of the world's religions who offered his head for protecting the identity symbols of another religion, for upholding the fundamental right to religious freedom of every person irrespective of the faith that he professes and practises.

Beneath this unique characteristic of the Sikh tradition of martyrdom there is a significant tenet of Sikh philosophy that the fundamental rights of man- particularly the right to religious freedom- are not a product of 'social contract', nor are these created and bestowed by the state in the garb of the secular myth of 'We the People' being the fountainhead of the fundamental rights. These

fundamental rights, rather, are innate to the very condition of being *human*, intrinsic to the very *being* of men and women. This conception of fundamental rights being innate to the very condition of being human flows from Guru Nanak's first Message that the primary identity of all men and women lies in their being human- the revolutionary idea serving as *élan vital* of the Sikh movement's mission of ushering in a new humanistic dispensation characterized by a new socio-politico-economic superstructure erected on the base of spiritual ideals and moral values, implying a reversal of the base-superstructure relationship envisaged in orthodox Marxism; this has become all the more significant in the making of the value-based 21st century society and the third millennium civilization. The synergy of the world's religions is necessary to counter the growing trend towards value-neutral, individualistic and material life styles and societal standards being fostered by globalization which as *an ideology* is fast converting all human and social relations into commodity relations, into digital dots.

But if contemporary Sikhism has to play such a role on the global level, it would have to update its praxis and reform its stereotyped mindset in line with doctrines of Sikhism as enshrined in SGGS. The decade (1980s) of Sikh fundamentalism-terrorism (mostly state-sponsored) has left behind its toxic effects in the form of asphyxiating orthodoxy, crippling conservatism, conformism, decadent dogmatism, violent intolerance and fetishization of the Sikh symbols; all these after-effects are encrusting the essential spirit of Sikhism. But thanks to the inherent liberalism of Sikh religion, Sikh society has immense potential for self-revival. The Sikh community, today, is, in a sense, at the crossroads of its history where it follows either the path of revival or the path towards further entrenchment of orthodoxy and dogmatized creed presided over by a mushrooming priestly class and reinforced by fast-growing *santdom*, both of which have no place in the Sikh doctrine. If the Sikh community is driven to the latter path, it would, for its fresh growth, require another kind of martyrs, from within, for bringing about the second Sikh revival, long overdue after the first Sikh reformation that arose in the last quarter of the 19th century. The top agenda of the second Sikh revival would be *liberation of Sikhism from 'the Sikhs,'* just as liberation of the Sikh shrines from hereditary *mahants* was uppermost on the agenda of the first Sikh revival.